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WHO WAS THE MEDICINE MAN?<sup>1</sup>

THE real character of peoples is never fully known until there has been obtained some knowledge of their religious ideas and their conception of the Unseen Power that animates all life. It is not generally credited by the white race that the tribes of this continent did not differ from the other people of the earth, in the effort to understand the meaning of life in all its infinite variety of forms, and the relation of these forms to the great, mysterious Power that animates all life. It is true, however, that the natives of this land had given these themes much thought, and had formulated their ideas concerning them long before the European set foot upon this soil.

The lack of intelligence as to this fact has been in part due to the absence of a written literature among the tribes living within the area of the United States, while such records as did exist have suffered grave misapprehension and mistreatment on the part of the observers. Moreover, the idea commonly entertained by the white race that they alone possess the knowledge of a God has influenced the mind of all those of that race who have come in contact with the Indians. We find that most of the missionaries who have labored among the Indians did not stop to inquire if the people had any idea of a Power that made and controlled all things. These well meaning and zealous men seem to have taken for granted that savages were not capable by their own effort of conceiving the thought of such a Power. So, when they happened to see the Indians worshipping according to their own peculiar customs, using forms, ceremonies, and symbols that were strange, they said, "Poor creatures, they are worshipping the devil!" when in truth the Indians never knew a personal devil until he was solemnly and religiously introduced by the teachers. The Indians recognized that there were evil influences that beset mankind, but these evil influences were never the centre of religious ceremonials, much less of worship. It was not possible, therefore, for the white people to gain, through the medium of these teachers, any definite knowledge of the real thoughts of the Indian concerning the Supreme Being.

Nor has the Indian fared much better at the hands of those who have undertaken to study him as an object of ethnological interest. The myths, the rituals, and the legends of the race have been fre-

<sup>1</sup> This address was delivered before the Fairmount Park Association of Philadelphia, on the occasion of the presentation by that association, to the city of Philadelphia, of Cyrus E. Dallin's statue of the Medicine Man, December 10, 1903. It is here reprinted, with the addition of introductory paragraphs, from the Proceedings of the association, by kind permission of the board of trustees.

quently recorded in such manner as to obscure their true meaning, and to make them to appear as childish or as foolish. This has been in a large measure due to linguistic difficulties. The Indian tongues differ widely from the English language, not only in the construction of sentences, but in general literary form. Moreover, the imagery of the Indian speech conveys a very different meaning to the mind of the Indian from that which it conveys to the mind of the white man. The Indian looks upon nature, upon all natural forms, animate and inanimate, from a different standpoint, and he draws from them different lessons, than does one of the white race. So when scholars give a literal translation of an Indian story, both its spirit and its form are lost to the English reader. Or when the myth is interpreted by an Indian who has picked up a scanty and colloquial knowledge of English, even if by chance he has himself a comprehension of the meaning of the myth he translates, his rendition will be one that no intelligent Indian can accept as a true presentation of the mythic story. It is from translations such as these that the mental capacity of the Indian has been judged and conclusions drawn as to his conception of the Supreme Being, and the relation of that Being to man and all other things, animate and inanimate.

Man is a religious being. Wherever he has been discovered upon the face of the earth, in whatever climate or in whatever condition, he has been found to have a religion, based upon some conception of a Power that brought into existence all things, and put into them life and motion.

A broad study of the human race has shown that the mind of man is the same the world over. However widely the races of the earth may have been separated from each other by geographic or other conditions, all seem to have been inspired with the same idea—that life in its infinite variety of forms comes from some mysterious Power invisible to man. Moreover, all people seem to have been alike imbued with the belief that this Power possessed, in a supernatural degree, qualities similar to those man was conscious of within himself, as a will to act, an intelligence to direct, and emotions that could be moved to pity and to love, to anger and to hatred. Therefore, this Power could destroy as well as create; hence, it was something to be feared, as it was equally to be adored.

When in the progress of time this fundamental idea concerning the supernatural Power became more definitely formed in the mind of primitive man, it followed as a natural sequence that he should desire to know how to conduct himself towards this Power, and in what manner he should worship it. There seemed at first to have been but two ways by which man could satisfy himself upon these questions.

One was by seeking to come into direct communication with the supernatural. This he found to be impossible amid the disturbing influences of the manifold activities of daily life; so, in order to achieve this desired end, he secluded himself in the silent solitude of the desert, or he wandered among the mountains, or in the deep forests, where, undisturbed, he could listen for the voice of the Mysterious One in the sighing of the winds through the trees, or look for his actual presence in the storm-cloud, among the fires of the lightning and the crashing of thunder. In the intensity of his feelings he heard voices in the sky, he saw visions and had strange dreams, all of which he believed to be the manifestations which his soul craved. Yet these but partly satisfied his longings.

The other way by which he sought to approach the Mysterious Power—a way which gave play to his imagination and also to his reasoning faculties—was by seeking to fathom the secrets of nature that surrounded him on all sides. With longing patience he watched the sun, the moon, the stars. Their magnitude and the precision of their movements stirred his soul with sublime thoughts. The air that he breathed; the rain that moistened the land; the earth, with its mountains and valleys, its seas and rivers; the seasons, with their unvarying succession of changes—all whispered to him of the presence of the Mysterious One. The mist that dimmed his mind's vision drifted away, and lo! he beheld in all these the foreshadowing of Jehovah, Allah, Wa-kon-da.

This search for a knowledge of the Mysterious One meant to early man the very life of his soul. The voices that he heard, the visions that he saw, the dreams that came to him, when he fasted on the mountains or in the desert, were all sacred to him; while the thoughts that were inspired by this search for a sign of the Divine Being in the sun, the moon, the stars, and the earth comforted his spirit, and became more and more necessary to his inner life. He therefore strove to perpetuate them in rites and ceremonies and mythic stories, so that they could be transmitted to his children and to his children's children, through the successive ages.

The task of preserving these rites and ceremonies, and of keeping them before the people, naturally fell to men of character, who were given to serious thought. Such men were regarded as peculiarly favored by the Divine Power, and for that reason they themselves became either the leaders in all interests, both secular and religious, or they were closely associated as advisers with the men who were rulers in temporal affairs. They were the Men of Mystery, the Prophets, the Priests.

In such way began the religions of the people of the eastern continents, and in like manner the knowledge of the Great Spirit dawned

upon the tribes that dwelt in this land ages before the coming of the pale-faces.

The Indians that lived within the borders of this country knew no written literature. The record of their religious conceptions was kept by means of rites, ceremonies, and symbols. Among many of the tribes (as it was in the case of my own tribe) these symbols were embodied in the organization of the tribe itself, and in the ceremonies connected with the avocations of the people.

First, as to the symbolism embodied in the organization of the tribe. The plan or order which was carried out when all the people camped together was that of a wide circle. This tribal circle was called Hu-dhu-ga, and typified the cosmos, the dwelling-place of the Great Spirit. The circle was divided into two great divisions or halves. The one called In-shta-sun-da, represented the heavens, and the other, the Hun-ga-she-nu, denoted the earth. This symbolic division of the tribal circle embodied the idea that the Great Spirit pervades the heavens and the earth. Again, each of the two great divisions was subdivided into clans, and each one of the ten clans of the tribe had its particular symbol, representing a cosmic force, or one of the various forms of life on the earth. The name of the clan, and the personal names of its members, all have reference to its symbol. The personal name was ceremonially bestowed upon the child; so within the tribe we have clan names that refer to the sun, moon, stars, clouds, rain, and wind; the earth, hills, lakes, rivers, and all animals, from birds to insects. In this manner the Indian recognized that all things were created by the Great Spirit.

The burden of memorizing and transmitting with accuracy, from one generation to another, the rites and ceremonies common to the tribe was divided among men selected from each of the clans. This responsibility was not placed upon these men without a careful consideration of each man's qualification and fitness to be so intrusted, for the reason that the recognition of the Great Spirit as a ruler, and the observation of the prescribed manner of worshipping him, was believed to be essential to the continued existence of the people as an organized body, that is, as a tribe.

Four requisites were demanded of the one who was to deal with the mysteries enshrined in the rites and ceremonies of the tribe.

First, and most important, was the recognition of the sanctity of human life. The man who was to mediate between the people and Wa-kon-da must stand before his tribesmen and the Great Spirit with hands unstained with the blood of his fellow man.

Second, he must be a man whose words never deviate from the path of truth, for the Great Spirit manifests the value placed upon truth in the regular and orderly movements of the heavenly bodies, and in the ever-recurring day and night, summer and winter.

Third, he must be slow to anger, for the patience of the Great Spirit is shown in his forbearance with man's waywardness.

Fourth, he must be deliberate and prudent of speech, lest by haste he should profane his trust through thoughtless utterance.

The men thus chosen were true to the sacredness of their office. They protected it from the abuse of those having an hereditary right to perform its duties. There are instances well known in my own tribe where men have refused to instruct their own sons in the sacred rites, because their character lacked some of these essential requisites. The honor and sanctity of the office was paramount to mere paternal feeling.

These were the prophets and priests, these were the men who were termed, in the Indian languages, the Men of Mystery, and by the Europeans the Medicine Men. The entire life of the Medicine Man, both public and private, was devoted to his calling. His solitary fasts were frequent, and his mind was apt to be occupied in contemplating the supernatural. His public duties were many, and often onerous. His services were needed when the children were dedicated to the Great Spirit; he must conduct the installation of chiefs; when dangers threatened he must call these leaders to the council of war, and he was the one to confer upon the warrior military honors; the appointment of officers to enforce order during the tribal buffalo hunt was his duty; and he it was who must designate the time for the planting of the maize. Apart from these tribal rites, he officiated at ceremonials which more directly referred to the individual, as on the introduction to the cosmos of a newly born babe.

The ritual in this particular ceremony is a supplication for the safety of the child from its birth to old age. In it the life of the infant is pictured as about to travel a rugged road, stretching over four hills, marking the stages of infancy, youth, manhood, and old age.

On the eighth day after the birth of a child the parents, through certain prescribed forms, send for the Medicine Man. In due time he comes, clad in his priestly garb, and stands at the door of the tent wherein the child lies. Raising his right hand to the sky he calls:

Ho! Ye Sun, Moon, Stars, all ye that move in the heavens;  
I bid ye hear me!  
Into your midst has come a new life.  
Consent ye, I implore!  
Make its path smooth, that it may reach the brow of the first hill!

Ho! Ye Winds, Clouds, Rain, Mist, all ye that move in the air;  
I bid ye hear me!  
Into your midst has come a new life.

Consent ye, I implore !

Make its path smooth, that it may reach the brow of the second hill !

Ho ! Ye Hills, Valleys, Rivers, Lakes, Trees, Grasses, all ye of the earth ;  
I bid ye hear me !

Into your midst has come a new life.

Consent ye, I implore !

Make its path smooth, that it may reach the brow of the third hill !

Ho ! Ye Birds, great and small, that fly in the air ;

Ho ! Ye animals, great and small, that dwell in the forest ;

Ho ! Ye insects, that creep among the grasses and burrow in the ground ;

I bid ye hear me !

Into your midst has come a new life.

Consent ye, I implore !

Make its path smooth, that it may reach the brow of the fourth hill !

Ho ! All ye of the heavens ; all ye of the air ; all ye of the earth ;

I bid ye all to hear me !

Into your midst has come a new life.

Consent ye, consent ye all, I implore !

Make its path smooth, then shall it travel beyond the four hills !

From this fragment of an extended rite, you may be able to catch a glimpse of the Indian's conception of the entirety of the universe.

There was another kind of Medicine Man very different in character. *He* held no office of public trust, for he lacked one of the essential qualifications for such a responsibility, and that was truthfulness ; he continually wandered in thought, word, and deed from the straight path of truth. He was shrewd, crafty, and devoid of scruples. The intelligent classes within the tribe held him in contempt, while the ignorant of the community feared him. His bold pretensions enabled him to carry on successfully his profession of deception upon the simple. He was a "Healer," something similar to the healer known to the civilized folk nowadays as "divine," only considerably more so. (Laughter.) He was a keen observer of nature and human nature and he used his acumen solely to his own advantage. Had he had book learning added to what he gleaned from experience, and lived in New York city, or Chicago, he would not fail of many followers. (Laughter.) Or, he might have been useful in the Weather Bureau at Washington (laughter), for when *he* said it would rain, it *did* rain. These up-to-date tricksters were much in evidence in the tribes, and they never failed to impress the stranger who travelled, and wrote books.

The tribal religious rites were invariably observed, either annually or at the beginning of a season. To go through the forms at any other time would be sacrilege, so the Medicine Man who officiated on these occasions never had the opportunity to become known to the

stranger, as had the sorcerer, who could go through his incantations whenever and wherever any inducements might offer. It can therefore be readily understood how this character became prominent in the literature of the white race, and how his clever inventions were believed to represent the religious beliefs of the Indians, to the serious misunderstanding of my race.

The true religious ideas of the Indian will never be fully comprehended, for already many of the rites and ceremonies that kept alive such conceptions as we have been considering are being forgotten in the changes that are rapidly taking place in the life of the present generation. The youths who might have carried on these teachings, and perhaps further developed them, are accommodating their lives to new conditions and taking up the avocations of the race dominant in the land.

I cannot discuss, from the standpoint of an artist, the Medicine Man as he is here portrayed by your sculptor, but, in the serious expression, the dignified bearing, the strength of pose, I recognize the character of the true Medicine Man (applause) — he who was the mediator between his people and the Great Spirit. The statue at once brings back vividly to my mind the scenes of my early youth, scenes that I shall never again see in their reality. This reopening of the past to me would never have been possible, had not your artist risen above the distorting influence of the prejudice one race is apt to feel toward another and been gifted with the imagination to discern the truth which underlies a strange exterior.

The representation of the Medicine Man as a nude figure is not a mere fancy of the artist, for in many of the religious rites the priest appeared in such manner. This nudity is not without its significance, it typifies the utter helplessness of man, when his strength is contrasted with the power of the Great Spirit, whose power is symbolized by the horns upon the head of the priest. With his best intelligence and greatest skill in the use of his hands, man is powerless to bring into existence even so much as the tiniest flower, while out of the force of the will of the Mysterious One all things in the heavens and the earth have come into existence with beauty, grandeur, and majesty. (Applause.)

*Francis La Flesche.*